



Holy Apostles

Summary :

The Church of the Holy Apostles was the second most important church in Byzantine Constantinople, after Hagia Sophia. Under Justinian I, the 4th-c. cruciform building fallen in disrepair was replaced by a new, also cruciform, structure with an elevation of five domes. It was used as the burial place of the emperors until 1028, and was demolished after the Ottoman conquest in 1453, in order to erect Fatih Camii on the same site. In 2001, structural evidence that most probably belong to the Byzantine church were discovered at the foundation of Fatih Camii, providing the basis for further research on a monument considered lost.

Date

4th - 15th century

Geographical Location

Constantinople

Topographical Location

Near the Aqueduct of Valens, at the site of Fatih Camii

1. History of the structure

The church of the Holy Apostles was situated on the 4th hill inside the [Constantinian wall](#) of the city, in the area of Constantiana, near to the "[Aqueduct of Valens](#)", at the site now occupied by Fatih Camii, which was erected shortly after the [Ottoman conquest](#) of 1453. Holy Apostles was the second most important, and probably second largest church after [Hagia Sophia](#), in [Byzantine Constantinople](#). Erected immediately west of, and adjoining to, the rotunda mausoleum of [Constantine the Great](#) (336), it was sometimes mistakenly attributed to Constantine I. The church was probably consecrated under [Constantius II](#), who saw that the relics of St. Timotheus and of the Apostles Andrew and Luke were translated there. However, according to C. Mango, the relics were put to the Mausoleum of Constantine, which was thus becoming a martyrion of the Apostles; as for the church, it may have been consecrated even later, in 370 according to the [Chronicon Paschale](#).¹ Another, cruciform, mausoleum was added probably in the 6th century and is attributed to [Justinian I](#). The mausoleums and the church were used for imperial burials until 1028, [Constantine VIII](#) being the last emperor buried there.²

The church played such a significant role in imperial ceremonies, and Porphyrogennetos's *De cerimoniis* names the Holy Apostles as a fixed point along the processional route that began at the [Golden Gate](#).³ Evidence of 9th-century repairs to the church, come from the *Vita Basilii*, with descriptions of Basil I strengthening the church with buttresses and reconstruction damaged sections.⁴ Probably around the same time a cycle of mosaics was added for the decoration of the church, which is partly described by Constantine of Rhodes ca. 940. At some point between the 10th and the 12th century the church was refurbished again and its mosaics partly redone; they were described once again by Nicolas Mesarites.⁵ The church may have suffered damages during the [capture of the city](#) by the [Crusaders](#) in 1204. The latest account giving details of the building is in the 15th-century *Choždenie inoka Zosimy* (The Journey of the Deacon Zosima).⁶

After the Ottoman conquest in 1453, the church was given to Gennadios II Scholarios as the seat of the [Patriarchate](#), but it was quickly found to be unsuitable, and the seat of the Patriarchate was moved to the Church of the [Virgin Pammakaristos](#).⁷ The Ottoman mosque of Fatih Camii, along with its imaret, ("the mosque of the conqueror") was



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built on the site by Mehmed II in 1463 and was extensively rebuilt by Mustafa III after having suffered damages from an earthquake of 1766.

2. Evidence provided by the sources

Until recently, it was thought that no physical evidence of the Church of the Holy Apostles remained. However, several reconstructions of the church and mausolea have been attempted on the grounds of descriptions in the written sources, a few – largely stylised – depictions in manuscripts, and comparison with other structures that copied the Holy Apostles, such as the church of [St John](#) in [Ephesus](#) and of St Mark in Venice.

Eusebius's *Vita Constantini* provides a detailed description of the Mausoleum of Constantine. The building was a freestanding rotunda, resembling the extant 4th-century imperial [mausolea](#) in Rome, within a rectilinear porticoed enclosure, surrounded by subsidiary buildings. It had a gilded [dome](#) and bronze grilles at openings around marble-reveted walls. Within it were stone sarcophagi containing imperial burials. Much less evidence is available for the 4th-century church, although it was a large cruciform structure like some other major 4th-century churches in both the East and in Italy.⁸

The Justinianic church, dedicated on June 28, 550 and demolished by order of Mehmed II in the mid-15th century, is described by Prokopios.⁹ This second church followed the cruciform plan of its predecessor, with an elevation of five domes, one over each "arm" and the fifth over the crossing, where the altar was placed. There was an [atrium](#) that prolonged the west arm, which was thus projecting longer than the other three. An internal colonnade was running parallel to the church's cruciform plan and all arms had [galleries](#).¹⁰ The central dome, on a [drum](#) pierced by windows, supported on four piers, stood higher than the other four domes of the church.¹¹ The church was rebuilt under Basil I, but its plan probably remained the same, so it is presumed that the building depicted in the "Menologion of Basil I" is the same as the Justinianic church.¹²

The internal decoration of the building has been described by Constantine of Rhodes between 931 and 944. The mosaics described are believed to belong to the period of the refurbishing under Basil I. A later account by Nicolas Mesarites, written between 1198 and 1203 while he was [skeuophylax](#) of the churches of the [Great Palace](#), presents various differences that seem to hint a further, post 10th c. redecoration.¹³ Mesarites also describes the marble revetment of the walls and the [opus sectile](#) pavements. The altar, under the central dome at the crossing, was beneath a pyramidal canopy and to its east there was a [synthronon](#), which had probably survived from the Justinianic period of the structure.

3. Archaeological evidence and attempted reconstruction

Actual remains of the church have been long considered lost, except for some fragmentary pieces of sculpture found in the mosque courtyard in 1953, re-used Byzantine columns in the mosque and nearby Ottoman buildings, an underground colonnaded [cistern](#) in the north of the Ottoman precinct, and the imperial sarcophagi (including those currently displayed outside Istanbul Archaeological Museum).¹⁴

However, in 2001 Ken Dark, co-director of the Istanbul Rescue Archaeological Survey along Feründün Özgümüş, examined Fatih Camii and the site of its surrounding külliye, and found evidence of a very large structure that dates



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earlier than the surviving portions of the original 15th-century mosque. This structure, apparently cruciform in plan, can be identified by courses of light whitish-grey limestone ashlar blocks that are clearly more eroded than the stonework above them. The blocks visibly pre-date 15th-century features and serve no structural purpose in the 15th-century mosque, while they might well belong to the Byzantine church of Holy Apostles that previously occupied the site.¹⁵

Based on this new evidence, Dark attempts the reconstruction of a structure ca. 57 m wide and 38 m long, with transepts ca. 35 m long and projecting ca. 6.5 m. This means that the ground plan of the building would be cruciform, but not arranged in a Greek cross pattern as Krautheimer proposed in his earlier reconstruction, based only on scriptural evidence.¹⁶ Dark further proposes an alternative reconstruction of the church, with a western narthex and side porticoes, which would give a plan closer to those of St John in Ephesus and St Mark in Venice, the two churches that are known to have been modelled on the Church of the Holy Apostles.¹⁷ In any case, provided that the structural evidence found in 2001 are indeed the remains of the Justinianic Holy Apostles, they provide a new and more solid basis for reconstruction of the church, which was long considered lost beyond rediscovery.

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 2. Downey, G., "The Tombs of the Byzantine Emperors at the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 79 (1959), p. 27.
 3. Mango, C., "The Triumphal Way of Constantinople and the Golden Gate," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 54 (2000), p. 177
 4. *Vita Basilii*, ed. I. Bekker, *Theophanes Continuatus* (CSHB, Bonn 1838), p. 323. The *Vita Basilii* constitutes the fifth book of Theophanes Continuatus and was written ca. 950 by Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos or someone from his milieu.
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 6. Dietrich, A. P., "13th-15th Century Russian Accounts of Constantinople and Their Value as Historical Sources," *Russian Literature* 40.2 (2006), p. 232.
 7. Mango, C., "Holy Apostles of Constantinople," in A. Kazhdan et al. (ed.), *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* 2 (Oxford-New York 1991), p. 940.
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 11. Krautheimer, R. (with Ćurčić, S.), *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (New Haven and London 41986), p. 242.
 12. Krautheimer, R. (with Ćurčić, S.), *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (New Haven and London 41986), p. 241, fig. 195.



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Glossary :

	atrium
	1. Antiquity: The large, open space within a building, which is envelopped by colonnades. 2. Byzantium: The forecourt of a church in early Christian, Byzantine, and medieval architecture. It was usually surrounded by four porticoes (quadriporticus).
	cistern
	A receptacle for holding rainwater, but also water transported from elsewhere, in order to keep it stored. The cisterns were either covered eiter open, and they could have more than one compartements.
	dome
	A characteristic element of Byzantine architecture. The dome is a hemispherical vault on a circular wall (drum) usually pierced by windows. The domed church emerges in the Early Byzantine years and its various types gradually prevail, while they are expanded in the Balkans and in Russia.
	drum of dome
	Part of the church, semicircular or polygonal, on which rises an hemispheric dome
	gallery
	The upper level of a house where the women resided. In ecclesiastical architecture it is the corridor above the aisles and narthex of a church, from where women attended the Liturgy. Originally (in the Byzantine period) the gallery, having a special entrance, was used exclusively by the emperor and the members of the royal family.
	mausoleum
	A type of large-scale burial monument, named after the tomb of Mausolus, satrap of Caria.
	opus sectile, the
	Technique of floor or wall decoration. Thin pieces of polychrome marble are carved or joined so that a decorative motif could be depicted.
	skeuophylax (megas)
	A cleric, usually a priest, whose main duty was to look after the sacred valuables and liturgical vessels of a church.
	synthronon
	Rows of built benches, arranged in a semicircular tier like a theatre, in the apse of a church. On these benches the clergy sat during Divine Liturgy. The bishop sat on the cathedra at the top of the synthronon.



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Quotations

The restoration of the church by Basil I

Likewise the famous great church of the Holy Apostles, which had lost its former beauty and firmness, he fortified by the addition of buttresses and the reconstruction of broken parts, and having scraped off the signs of old age and removed the wrinkles, he made it once more beautiful and new.

Vita Basilii 80, ed. I. Bekker, *Theophanes Continuatus. Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae* (Bonn 1838), p. 323, transl. Mango C., *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453: Sources and Documents* (London ²1986), p. 192.

The mosaics in the church of the Holy Apostles

626. The craftsman has piously ordained that the central [dome] should be elevated and rule over the others, destined as it was to be the Lord's great throne, and to protect His precious image...

737. In the middle of the costly ceiling, [the church] bears a representation of Christ as if He were the sun, a wonder exceeding all wonders; next, like the moon, that of the stainless Virgin, and, like the stars, those of the wise Apostles. The whole inner space has been covered with a mixture of gold and glass, as much as forms the domed roof and rises above the hollowed arches, down to [the revetment of] multicolored marbles and the second cornice. Represented here are the deeds and venerable forms which narrate the abasement of the Logos and his presence among the mortals...

858. In addition to all the above wonders, you will see, O excellent reader, this further astounding spectacle, an altogether exceptional one, which the artist has painted better than anything else in the church so as to move to tears and heart-felt pity those who behold this image of the Passion:... Judas, that wretched man, betraying his Lord and teacher to be murdered... The artist has painted his very manner, the savage cast of his face, his pale countenance, clenched jaws, hateful eyes filled with murder, nostrils as of an asp, breathin anger... His feet, set wide apart, hasten with big strides on their wicked path, and his two hands strive to catch the Lord...

916. The seventh spectacle you may see among all these wonders is Christ's Passion... painted with feeling... What man, even if he had a heart of stone, upon seeing the image of the Passion, would not be amazed in his spirit as he beholds this altogether astonishing event...

Constantine, of Rhodes, Description of the Church of the Holy Apostles, transl. Mango C., *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453: Sources and Documents* (London ²1986), pp. 198-9.

Chronological Table



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336: Construction of the Mausoleum of Constantine I.

356-357: Translation of the relics of St. Timotheus and of the Apostles Luke and Andrew to the Holy Apostles (either to the Mausoleum or to the Church)

370: Consecration of the church, according to the *Chronicon Paschale*

536: Justinian's church of Holy Apostles

July 28, 550: Consecration of the Justinianic church

ca. 940: Description of Constantine of Rhodes

1028: Last imperial burial at the church (Constantine VIII)

1453: Church ceded to the Orthodox patriarchate to use it as its seat

1469: Demolition of the church for the erection of Fatih Camii

2001: Structural evidence discovered at the foundations of Fatih Camii probably belong to the Byzantine church